

Reading Class: A 10-year Review of Class Effectiveness

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This article is a review of the reading component of a university English department's curriculum. The review focuses on TOEIC scores to measure the effectiveness of reading classes from 2009 to 2018. Average TOEIC scores are used to measure the two-year increase in reading ability of students in reading classes over this ten-year period. The ratio of average reading to listening scores is also reviewed. A revision of the department's curriculum occurred during this period and the effects of the curriculum changes are discussed in regard to these different measures.

This article is a review of the reading component of Ohkagakuen University's School of Liberal Arts, Department of English's (SLADE) curriculum from 2009–2018. This article will look at TOEIC scores over this time for first and second year students. It will compare total TOEIC and reading scores over this time to determine the effectiveness of the classes and the effectiveness of changes made in the curriculum. The writer of this article was the course coordinator for the Academic Reading classes and is presently coordinator of the current Reading and Writing III and IV classes. As such, this article will focus more on what is done in those courses.

Introduction to SLADE's English Curriculum

SLADE's current English curriculum consists of required English skills courses taken in the first, second and third year. Elective English courses are also provided throughout the four years. The majority of the required skills courses are concentrated in the first and second years. Students are required to take Listening and Speaking I–IV, Reading and Writing I–IV, English Presentation I–IV and English Phonetics I–II in the first and second years. Listening and Speaking I–IV and Reading and Writing I–IV meet twice a week. In the third year, students are required to take the English skills classes of Academic Writing I–II and Communicative English I–II. The present curriculum was put into place in 2016 to improve the efficiency of classes; to make classes more attractive to students and to increase students' English level for when they graduate. This review is a beginning to more extensive analysis that needs to be done for the new curriculum in the future.

SLADE's Original English Reading Curriculum 2009–2016

SLADE began in 2009. Over the past ten years, the reading component of SLADE's curriculum has changed in various ways. Under SLADE's original curriculum, the reading component consisted of first and second year required English skills courses. They were Extensive Reading I–IV and Academic Reading I–IV. In the third year, students were required to take Extensive Reading and Listening I–II. However, the third year reading class is not included in this limited review. This article focuses on the first and second year required reading skills classes.

Students took one 90-minute Extensive Reading class and one 90-minute Academic Reading class each week. Students were required to take three hours of reading classes each week for their first four semesters of Ohkagakuen University's English studies. That equates to 90 hours of reading class time for each year.

The Extensive Reading classes were designed to develop the students' reading fluency and positive attitudes toward reading. In Extensive Reading I and II, students used a range of graded readers for beginning readers (Oxford Reading Tree series) and children's books. Students also did sustained silent reading and timed repeated reading in class. In Extensive reading III and IV, students focused on contemporary stories in graded readers and reading books for older readers. It was designed to help develop student confidence in reading. Students continued to do sustained silent reading and timed repeated reading in class in addition to various spoken and written reports on their reading.

The Academic Reading classes were designed to develop students' reading speed and comprehension. The Academic Reading classes used textbooks designed by this writer. The textbook included intensive reading texts. In intensive reading, learners read texts that are more difficult, in terms of content and language, than those of extensive reading (Macalister, 2011). The articles were also a little above the students' reading level, in contrast to extensive reading where students are reading at their level. Intensive reading helps students build language awareness. Two goals of intensive reading are to focus on new language such as vocabulary and grammar and to focus on ideas such as themes and topics (Macalister, 2011). The classes also contained exercises that helped students develop reading strategies, such as previewing, skimming, scanning and understanding meaning from context. The reading strategies helped students to read faster and understand more of what they read. The class also had a timed reading book. Students read passages from Reading for Speed and Fluency 1 by Paul Nation and Casey Malarcher. Timed reading is a comprehensive tool that enables students to increase and improve reading rate and reading accuracy (Taylor, 2015).

Timed reading is when students read passages that are not difficult for them to read. They read the passages in as short of time as they can. Students should read them quickly and understand them well. Reading easy English is very useful because while students read, they see a lot of vocabulary and grammar in context. Over time, this will naturally build the students' ability to use correct English and improve their English skills. Benefits of Timed Reading are "the ability to read text rapidly, smoothly, effortlessly, and automatically with little attention to the mechanics of reading such as decoding" (Chang, 2010).

Academic Reading classes also had a vocabulary component. Students used the textbook, Learning English Vocabulary by David Barker to study vocabulary. Using this book, at the end of the two years, students should have learned the 2000 most frequently used words in English. If a student knows the first 2000 words, then they should be familiar with 95% of the running words used in friendly conversation (Baker, 2010). To reinforce their vocabulary learning, students had a weekly quiz over the 25 vocabulary words they studied that week. This curriculum was used from 2009 to 2015 (2016 for second year students).

SLADE's New Curriculum 2016~

In 2016, SLADE's new curriculum was introduced to the first year students. The curriculum was changed for various reasons. In part, it was hoped that the new curriculum would streamline courses. The goal was to combine skills classes so that students saw the same teacher twice a week and skills were studied in combination for greater learning efficiency. It was hoped that the changes in the curriculum would make classes more modern and therefore attractive to students in an effort to increase enrollment. The English department also wanted to increase the graduating students' English level. It was thought that the new curriculum with its greater efficiency and therefore more effective classes would do this. The current curriculum has reading and writing skills combined in required Reading and Writing classes I–IV. The former Communicative English classes I–IV and Listening classes I–IV have been combined into Listening and Speaking classes I–IV.

For Reading and Writing classes I–II, the aim of the course is to give a strong base in both English reading and writing. For reading skills, the course focuses on extensive reading. Students use graded readers, do quizzes to check understanding and they meet word count targets. This is a three-credit class in recognition of the heavy workload that writing places on students.

Reading and Writing classes III–IV is coordinated by the writer of this review. The aim of this course is to develop students' reading and writing speed and comprehension. Students work on building their reading and writing fluency. For reading skills, students focus on academic reading. In each class students do a variety of exercises to improve their reading skills. The reading exercises help develop reading strategies, so that students can read faster and understand more. The class currently uses the textbook: Reading and Vocabulary Development 2; Thoughts and Notions by Patricia Ackert. The students have a timed reading textbook, Reading for Speed and Fluency 2 by Paul Nation and Casey Malarcher. This is the second edition of the books originally used in Academic Reading 1–IV. It is used for the same purposes as it was used before. Students also do speed word matching. This is where students choose the correct word from 4 similar looking word choices. Students match 25 words as quickly as possible. This improves reading speed by having students practice seeing words as units and not individual letters.

The new curriculum reduced the amount of reading class time students are required to take from three hours a week under the old curriculum to an hour and a half a week for their first four semesters of their university English studies. That equates to approximately 45

hours of reading class time each year. As the reading class is combined with the writing class, an approximation of the number of hours spent on reading in the class is as accurate as can be made.

Vocabulary study was removed from reading class for practical reasons. In order to equalize the workload over classes, vocabulary study was moved to Listening and Speaking classes I–IV. As vocabulary is an important part of reading, it is included in this 10-year review. With the start of Listening and Speaking classes, a new textbook was chosen. The classes used Oxford Word Skills by Ruth Gains and Stuart Redman. The change was made to give the students a chance to see words in context (written paragraphs) and study common vocabulary words under a single theme (food and drink, places). The book also has word exercises to allow the students more practice with the words each week. Once again students took weekly vocabulary quizzes to reinforce their vocabulary study. In 2018, the vocabulary component of Listening and Speaking classes was changed to allow more conversation time in class. In the hopes that students could more fully develop their speaking skills, the vocabulary component was moved to out of class time. The class now uses an online learning system called “WordEngine” <https://www.wordengine.jp>. The students are required to match 420 words in the first year and 490 words in the second year correctly each week. The online learning system has progressive learning and is customized for each student with a diagnostic assessment of the student’s starting level. As the students get better at vocabulary and learn more words, the online learning system gives students continually harder words to study to challenge the students. WordEngine website states, (Cih, Browne & Culligan, 2018)

WordEngine uses spaced repetition science to promote long-term memory retention. Each new word is automatically repeated until it is fully retained. This method introduces new “unseen” words and then re-tests comprehension at five increasingly greater time intervals. Learners must correctly identify each word at each time interval or the word is sent back to the starting point. WordEngine allows students to quickly and permanently acquire a tremendous amount of new vocabulary for a variety of important subjects.

Vocabulary learning is now online, so there are no more in-class vocabulary quizzes. As this is new to SLADE, it is unknown if this method is effective for vocabulary learning within our department.

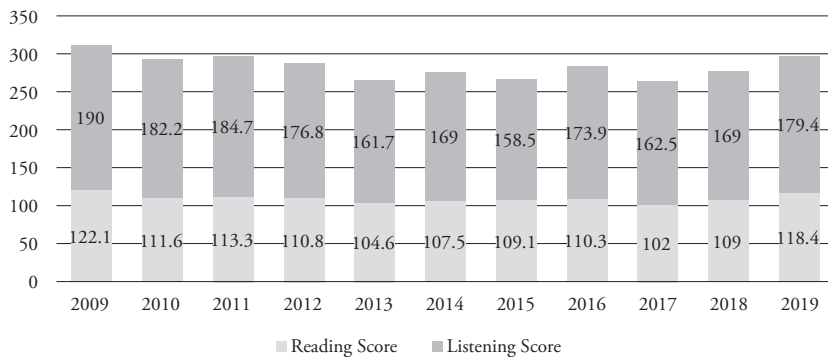
Data Assessment

TOEIC scores for SLADE students have been collect by the department since the beginning of the department. This data was used to make the following graphs and tables for comparison of classes over the ten-year period. The writer would like to thank SLADE department member, Ms. Eri Ikawa for her tremendous and continuing effort in collecting this data over the past ten years.

Overall TOEIC Scores

The first graph and table show the average reading, listening and overall TOEIC scores for each entering class over the past ten years (2009 to 2019). This graph was made to show how each class compares to other classes over the years. It is necessary to determine if there are any outstanding years, with either high or low scores that might affect the analysis results.

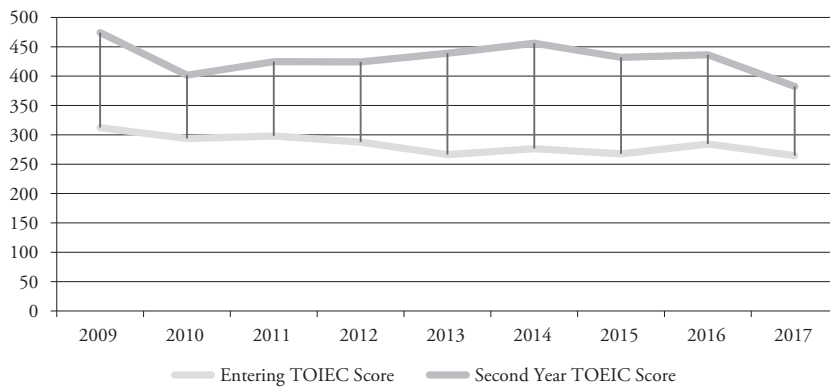
Average Entering TOEIC Scores for SLADE



Column Graph 1 Data of Entering TOEIC Scores for SLADE											
Year	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Total Score	312.1	283.8	298	287.6	266.3	276.5	267.6	284.2	264.5	278	297.8
Reading Score	112.1	111.6	113.3	110.8	104.6	107.5	109.1	110.3	102	109	118.4
Listening Score	190	182.2	184.7	176.8	161.7	169	158.5	173.9	162.5	169	179.4

The data from Column Graph 1, above, shows a 45-point difference from the lowest average TOEIC score in 2013 to the highest average TOEIC score in 2009. That does not seem to be an overly large or worrisome value. The bar graph also shows an upturn in the average TOEIC score over the last three years. It is hoped that this trend continues. The bar graph further reveals that the ratio between the reading score and the listening score remains fairly constant. This is further discussed in this review paper on pages 38 and 39.

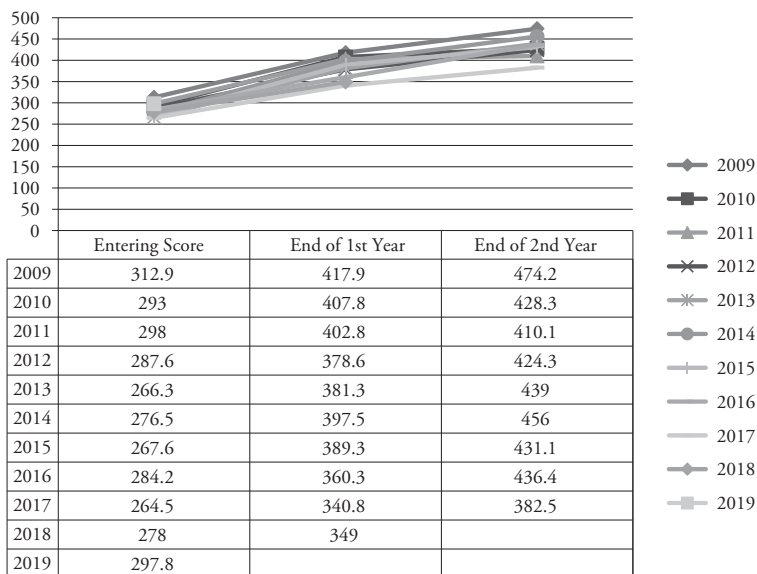
TOEIC Scores Comparison-Two Years



Line Graph 2 is a comparison of the average entering TOEIC scores and students' average TOEIC scores after two years of English study. The graph shows improvement every year, with the greatest improvement being class 2014.

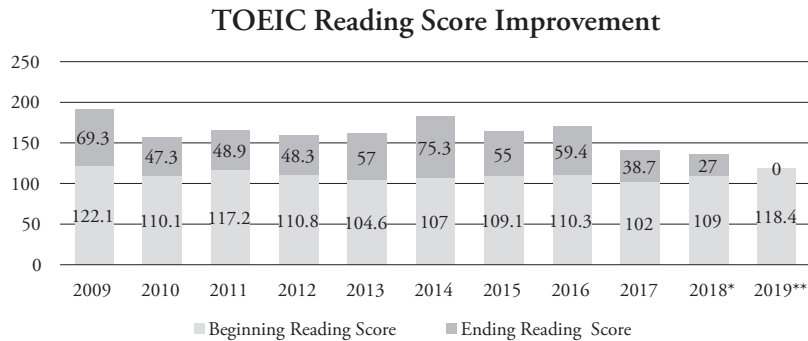
The Line Graph 3, below, shows improvement in TOEIC from the entering score to the end of the second year for each year, 2009–2017. Line Graph 2 shows that TOEIC score have improved over every two-year period. The clumping of the lines indicates that improvement has been fairly uniform over the last ten years with the possible exception of the entering class of 2017, which is slightly lower. This is important to show that on average, all students are improving their English level.

Improvement in TOEIC Score Over Two Years

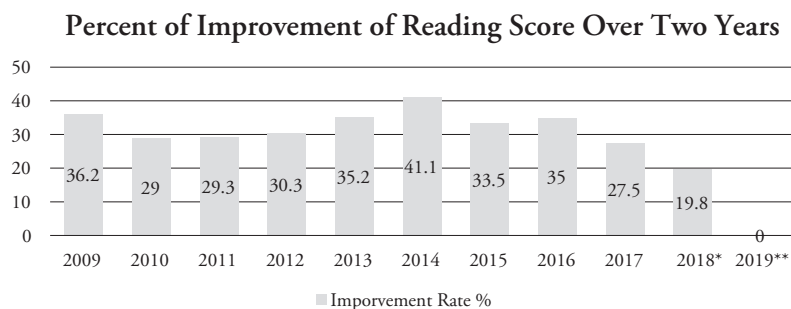


Reading Score Improvement

The following discusses improvement in the TOEIC reading score over the past ten years. Column Graphs 4 and 5, below, show the improvement in reading scores that occurred during the first year and second year classes from 2009 to 2019.



The bottom portion of Column Graphs 4, above, shows students' average entering TOEIC score for reading. The upper portion is the number of points that students improved by the end of their second year. The proportions of the bars sections clearly show that on average improvement has occurred but at a slow rate. Most classes had an improvement of 45 to 50 points with the exception of the class of 2017. The greatest on average improvement was the class of 2014.

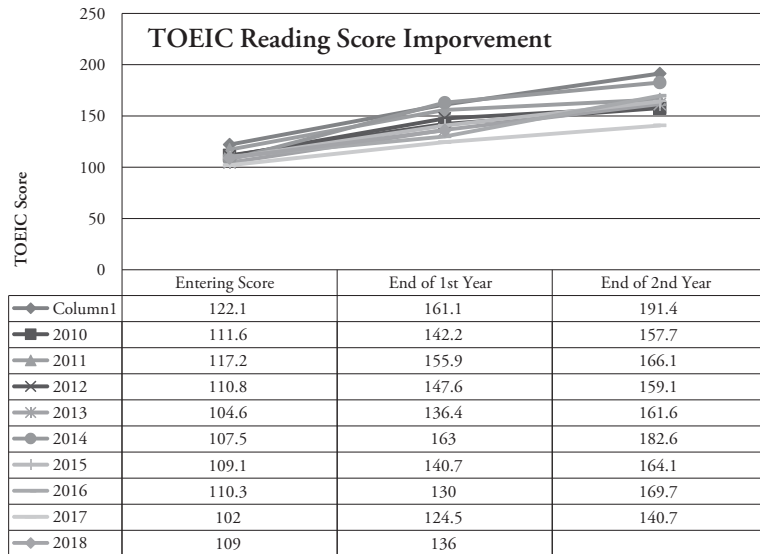


Column Graphs 4 and 5 Data for TOEIC Reading Score Improvement and percentage of Improvement											
year	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Beginning Score	122.9	110.4	117.2	110.8	104.6	107.5	109.1	110.3	102	109	118.4
Ending score	191.4	157.7	166.1	159.1	161.6	182.6	164.1	169.7	140.7	136*	
Percentage %	36.2%	29%	29.3%	30.3%	35.2%	41.1%	33.5%	35%	35%	27.5	
* One year score only ** no comparison made											

Column Graphs 5, above, show improvement in TOEIC reading scores by percentages. This again shows that class 2014 had the greatest amount of improvement. The graph shows

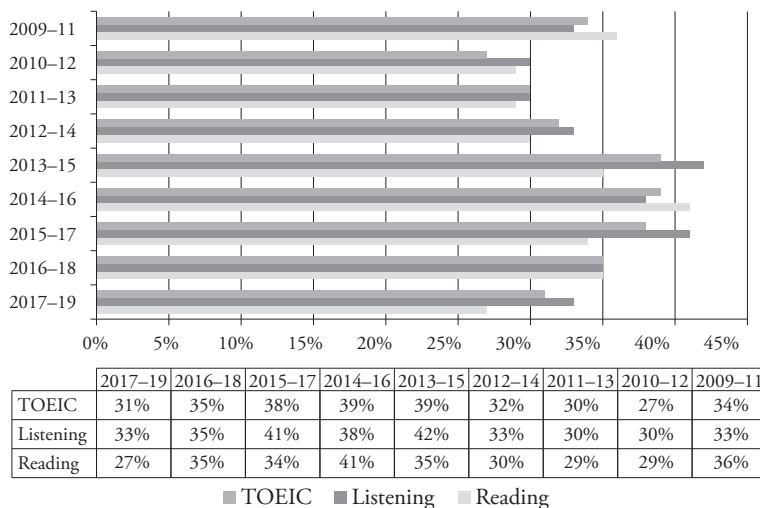
that class 2017 had the least amount of improvement. It should be noted that class 2009, which had the highest TOEIC score did not have the highest improvement rate for reading.

Line Graph 6, below, shows reading improvement in first and second year. The clumping of the lines indicates that improvement has been fairly uniform over the last ten years. Even class 2017 line is at an angle that is comparable to other years.



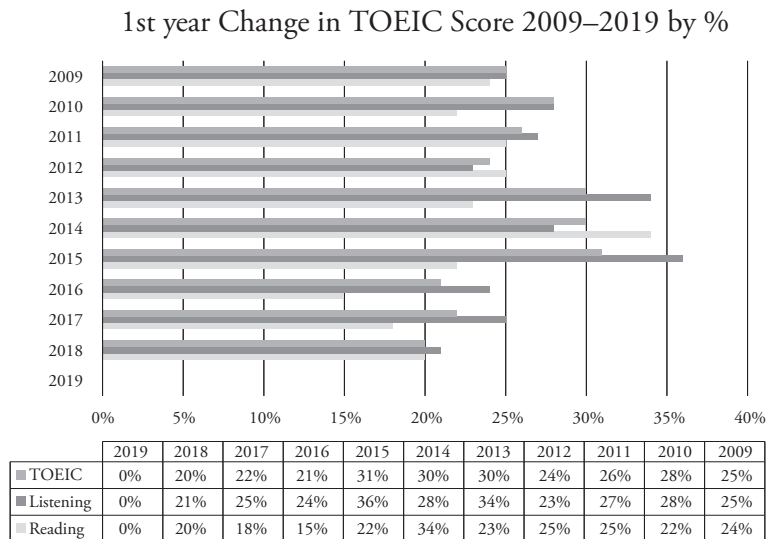
Next, two-year improvement in reading and listening scores are compared with overall TOEIC scores.

2-year Change in TOEIC SCORE 2009–2019 by %

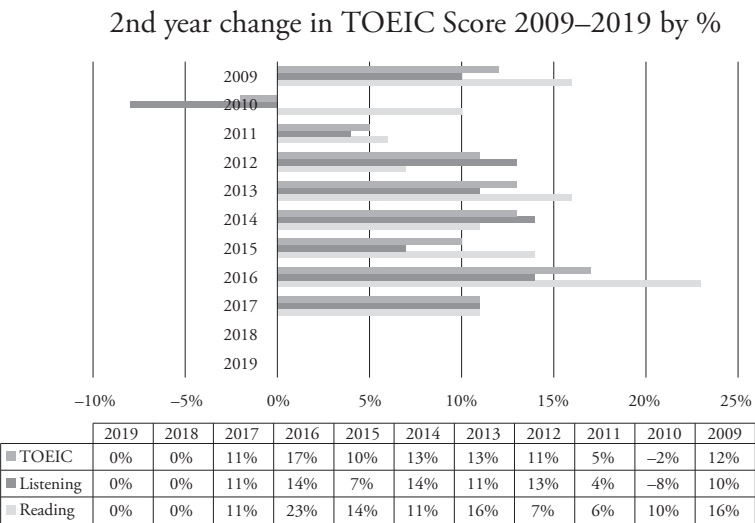


Bar Graph 7, above, shows that overall class 2013 and class 2014 showed the greatest percentage of improvement on average in TOEIC scores. Class 2009 and class 2014 showed the greatest percentage of improvement in reading scores. Class 2013 and class 2015 showed the greatest percentage of improvement in listening scores. None of these classes are after 2016 when the change of curriculum occurred.

Bar Graph 8, below, shows first year improvement and Bar Graph 9, below, shows second year improvement.



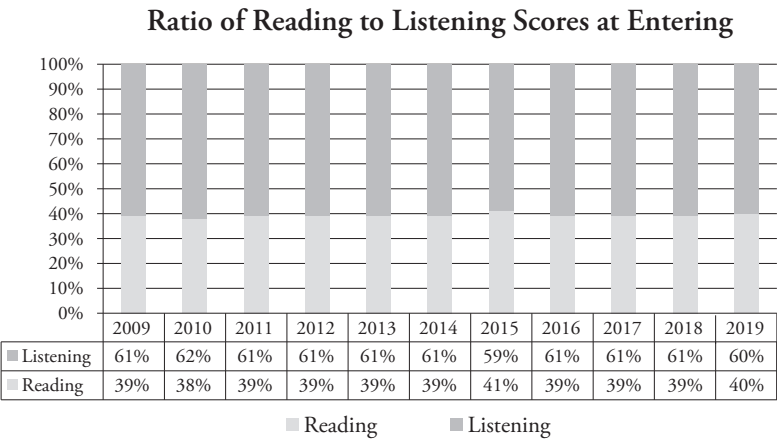
Bar Graph 8, above, shows first year improvement by percentage. For first years, classes 2013, 2014 and 2015 showed the greatest improvement in overall TOEIC scores. Class 2014 again showed the greatest improvement in reading scores. For listening scores, class 2013 and class 2015 showed the greatest improvement. None of these greatest improvements occurred after 2016 when the new curriculum was introduced.



Line Graph 9, above, shows second year improvement by percentage. For second years, class 2016 showed the greatest improvement in overall TOEIC scores. Class 2009, 2013 and class 2016 showed the greatest improvement in reading scores. For listening scores, class 2014 and class 2016 showed the greatest improvement. None of these greatest improvements occurred after 2017 when students under the new curriculum would be in their second year.

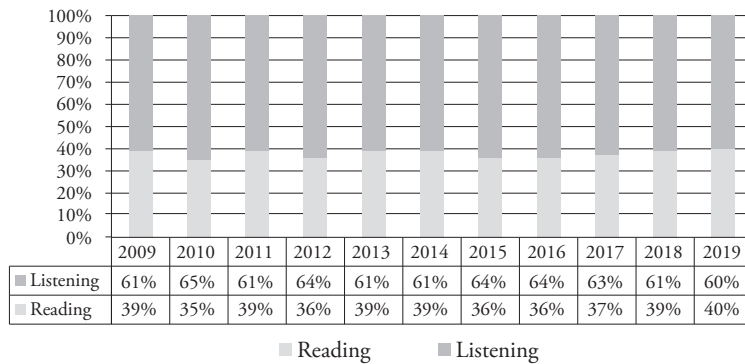
Ratio of Reading Scores to Listening Scores for TOEIC.

Finally, the writer will look at the ratio of reading scores to listening scores for TOEIC at entering SLADE and at the end of the first and second years over the investigation period. Column Graph 10,11 and 12, below, show the comparison.



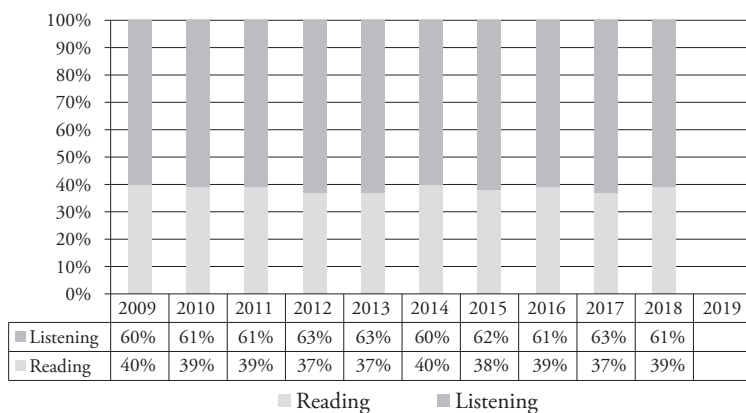
Looking at the ratio of reading scores to listening scores for the TOEIC test when entering SLADE it is surprising how similar the ratio is and how consistent they are. The variation range is only three points over all ten years.

Ratio of Reading to Listening Scores at End of First Year



Looking at the ratio of reading scores to listening scores for the TOEIC test at the end of the first year, the variation range is only four points over the ten-year period. The ratios are also consistent over the ten years.

Ratio of Reading to Listening Scores at End of Second Year



Looking at the ratio of reading scores to listening scores for the TOEIC test at the end of the second year, the variation range is only three points over the ten years. The greatest variation over any two-year period is only 5 points for class 2015. Many of the classes maintain the same ratio over the three TOEIC tests included in the charts over the two years.

Conclusion

Looking at the data it is clear that TOEIC scores have improved during the first two year

at SLADE over the 10-year investigation period. The rate of improvement varies each year, with the greatest improvement in TOEIC scores being 2014. Class 2014 doesn't have the lowest TOEIC entrance score, but they do have the greatest improvement in TOEIC reading score on average in the first year of any year in the review.

When looking at the TOEIC reading scores data, there does seem to be some variation. Class 2009 and Class 2014 show the greatest improvement in column graphs 4 and 5. While classes 2010, 2011 and 2017 show the least improvement. Class 2010, 2011 and 2014 were all under the old curriculum and while the teachers may have changed, the materials were substantially the same. The difference in improvement is most likely due to individual classes. The ratio of TOEIC reading score to listening score column graphs 10,11 and 12 show that the ratio reading to listening scores is similar and constant over the two years and in comparison with other years. This give credence to the proposition that it is the individual class rather than the reading classes themselves that account for the differences.

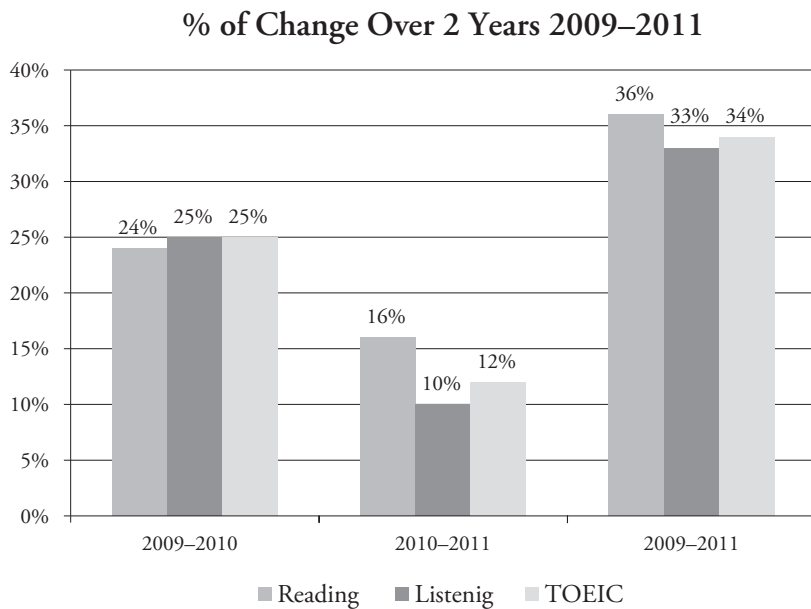
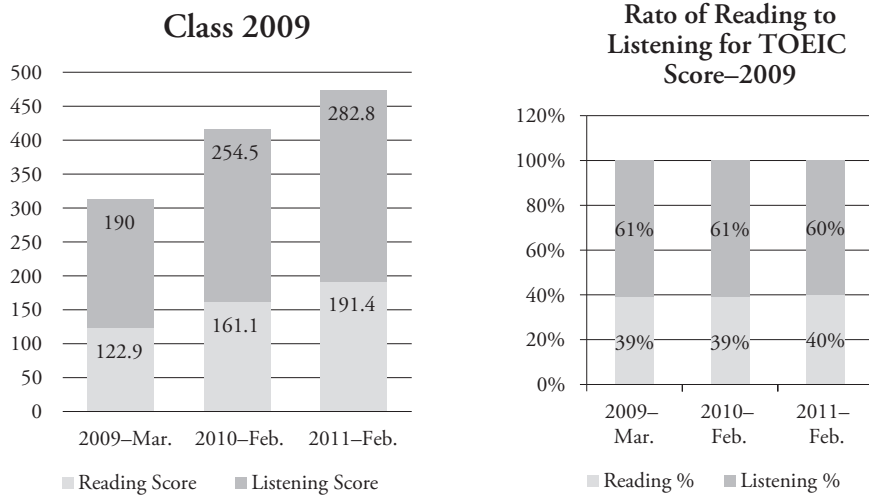
When looking at the data with regard to differences under the new curriculum (2016-), not much effect can be seen in the overall TOEIC scores or reading scores. The data sample is small which could be one reason. This seems to indicate that this type of review needs to be performed again when more information is available. Looking at the data available, Line Graphs 6 and 7 show that TOEIC scores after two years of study are similar to before the new curriculum was introduced. Column Graphs 10,11 and 12 show that the ratio of average reading scores to average listening scores is similar and constant over the two years and in comparison with other years. An optimistic way to interpret this data is to consider that present SLADE students only have approximately 45 hours of reading class time each year compared to the 90 hours of reading class time each year under the old curriculum. This could indicate the new class style is effective as they produce similar TOEIC scores. A pessimistic interpretation of this same data would be that whether they study 45 hours or 90 hours, they are going to improve the same amount and that some other factors have a greater affect on students' improvement. This merits closer investigation.

Further breakdown of TOEIC scores for each year (2009–2019) is available in the appendix.

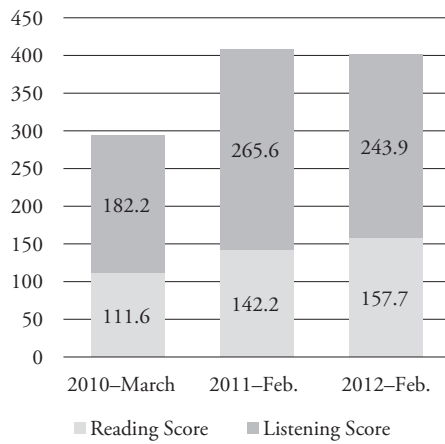
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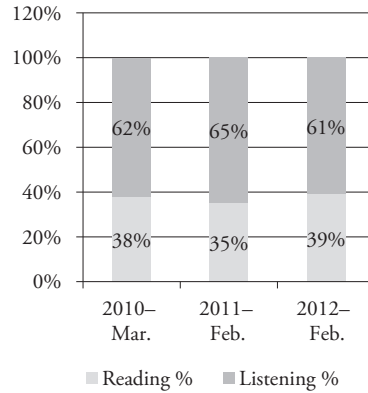
Appendix



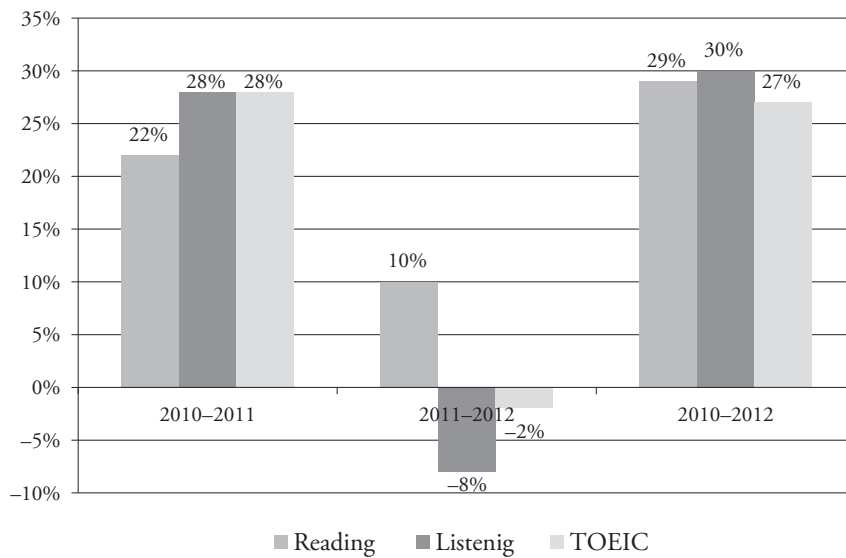
Class 2010

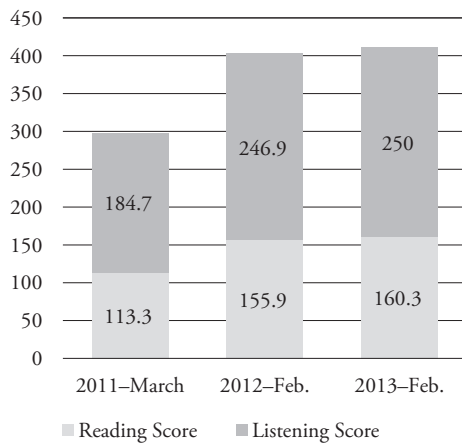
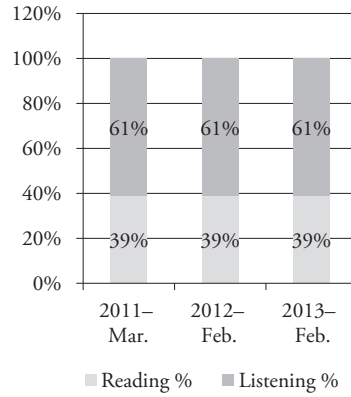
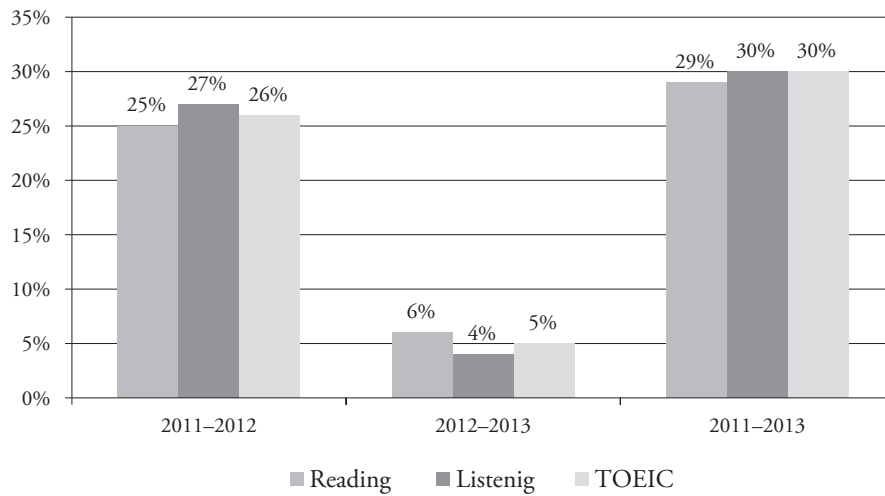


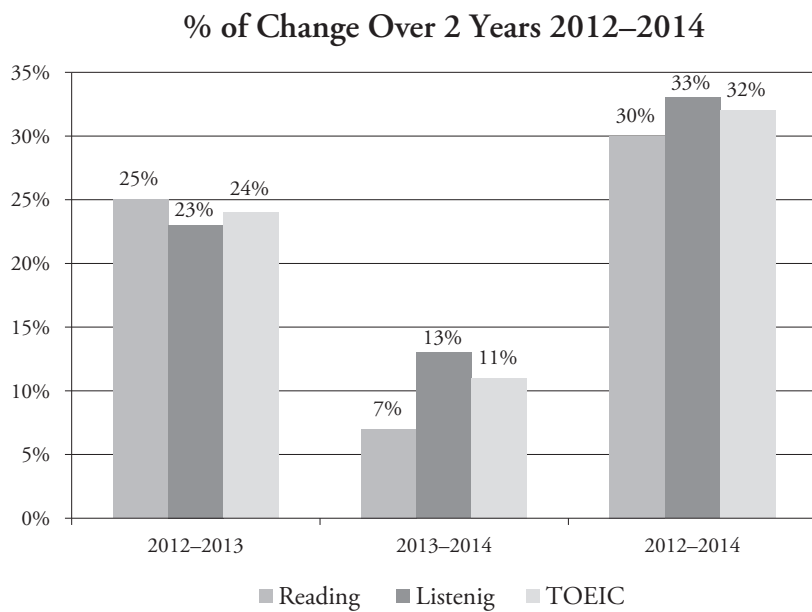
Ratio of Reading to Listening for TOEIC Score-2010

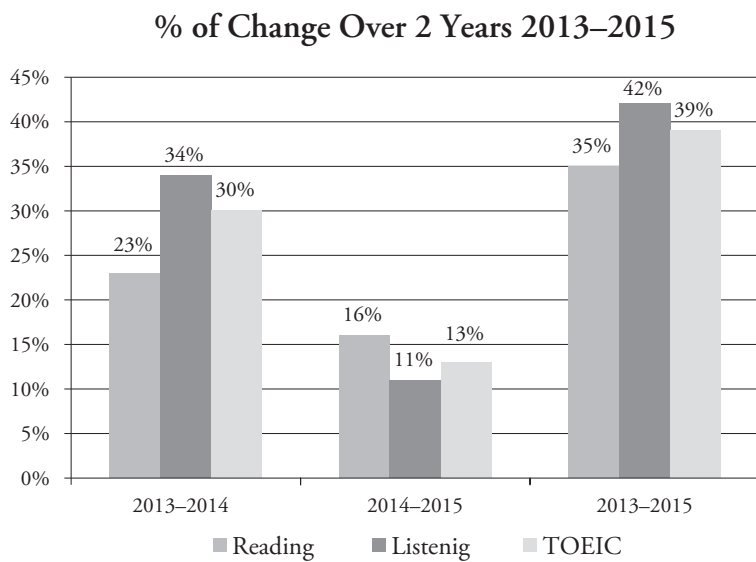
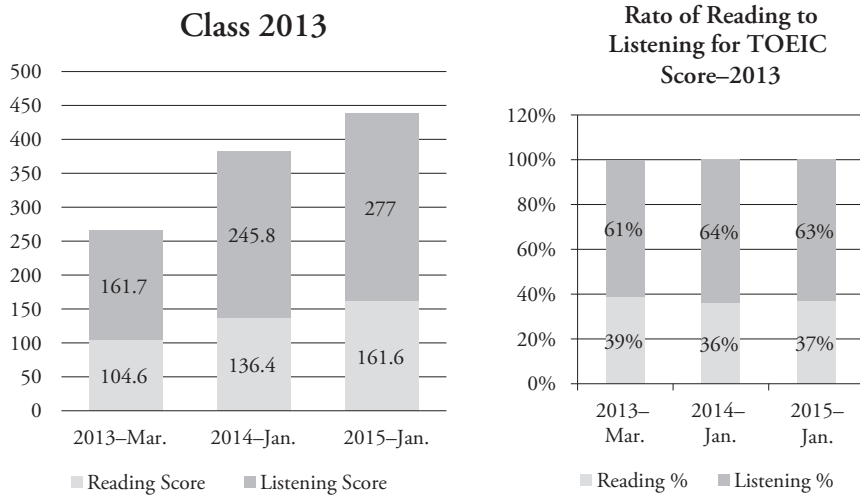


% of Change Over 2 Years 2010-2012

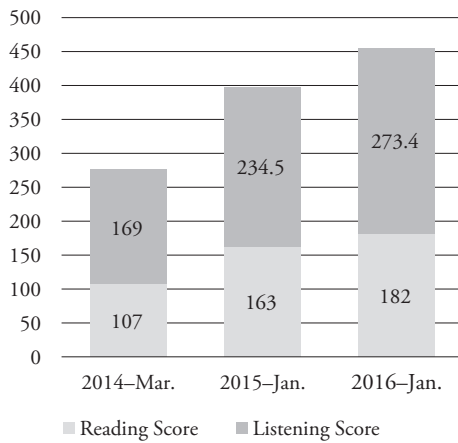


Class 2011**Ratio of Reading to Listening for TOEIC Score-2011****% of Change Over 2 Years 2011-2013**

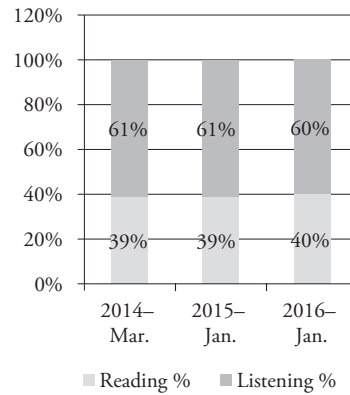




Class 2014



Ratio of Reading to Listening for TOEIC Score-2014



% of Change Over 2 Years 2014-2016

